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By EUGENE V. RISHER

Newhouse News Service

WASHINGTON - Part of the enduring mythology of America is that the nation has satellites sophisticated enough to determine the sex of a rabbit from 150 miles in space.

The government public relations apparatus would have Americans believe that when the Russians sneeze, the United States knows it.

Such extravagant claims aside, the United States has an enormously expensive and sophisticated network for monitorin activities in the Soviet Union and throughout the world.

This is the basis for President Carter's claims that if the Russians cheat on the new nuclear arms agreement, he will know it.

But in fact, "verifying" Soviet compliance with all the provisions of the proposed treaty will be a policy judgment based on an assessment of Soviet intentions as well as capabilities.

The pictures and telementry stolen from the atmosphere - the monitoring - can tell only part of the story.

This will be the case with the SALT II treaty which Carter is about to sign with the Soviet Union. It has been the case with all previous strategic arms agreements.

Because this new agreement attempts for the first time to limit the quality as well as the quantity of nuclear weapons, the credibility of the U.S. verification scheme has come increasingly under question.

And because the monitoring system and its capabilities are among the nation's most tightly held secrets, it is difficult for Carter to defend the verification system beyond saying, "trust me."

The White House's zeal in knocking down any challenges to the verification system raised by opponents of the treaty has only added confusion to the debate so far.

Adm. Stansfield Turner, the director of central intelligence, got himself in trouble with White House SALT-sellers recently when he told a group of reporters that the CIA would assess the intelligence community's ability to monitor Soviet tests and missile deployment but would make no overall judgment on the varifiability of the treaty.

Critics seized on this as evidence that the nation's intelligence chief had misgivings about the system.

Actually, Turner has just being candid.

Under pressure of the attacks, administration officials have been forced to lift slightly the shroud of secrecy surrounding the system. In broad terms, it works like this:

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